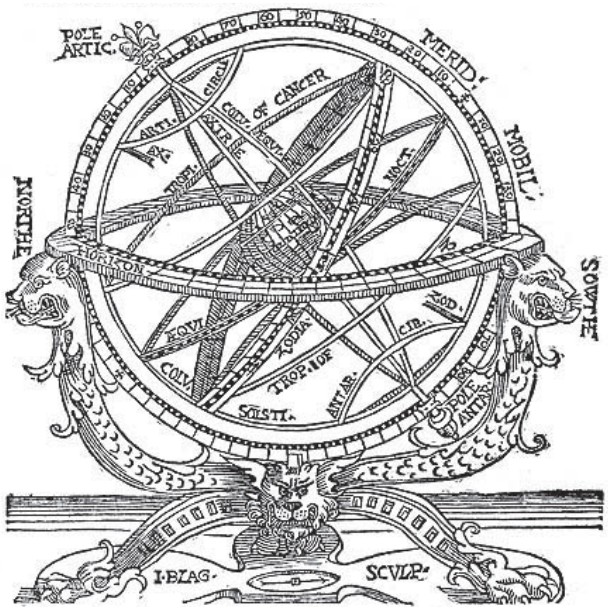

The Mathematical Jewel, *John Blagrave, 1585*

Astrolabe

An astrolabe is a historical instrument used by classical astronomers and astrologers. Until the invention of the sextant, it was the chief navigational instrument used by mariners to locate and predict the position of the sun, moon, planets and stars, to determine local time, give local longitude, and to measure distances. Astrolabes were also sometimes used in European nations to construct horoscopes.

Magic and Illusion

Although it is possible that Bermuda is the location for *The Tempest*, other performances have placed it in other locations, including Virginia, Ireland, and the coast of Africa. The ambiguous nature of the island lends itself towards themes of dreams and magic, ideas which dominate the play. The structure of the play intrinsically links these themes: it opens with a storm that has been conjured up by Prospero as a piece of magical art, and the play is framed by the sleep of mariners who are not directly involved in the action. The idea of life is a dream or an illusion – and therefore theatrical – was one that Shakespeare often explored.

In Shakespeare's time there was little distinction between magic and science. Many people believed in witches and the supernatural. One of the most famous Elizabethan "scientists" was Dr. John Dee, who was regarded as a "magus". This was a term applied to someone who dabbled in magic, either in the field of astrology, alchemy, or sorcery. Shakespeare may well have had Dr. Dee in mind in creating the character of Prospero. Prospero develops the power to raise and quell storms, make himself invisible, conjure up music, and put people to sleep. In some productions, Prospero's magic powers seem benign, aimed at achieving virtue and goodness, compared with the evil or black magic of Sycorax (Caliban's mother), who previously inhabited the island and practiced sorcery. Other productions make Prospero's magic seem more sinister.

Source of the Play

One of Shakespeare's sources for the play was probably a series of pamphlets published in 1610 detailing a shipwreck that occurred after a hurricane off the coast of Bermuda in 1609. The passengers and crew of the Sea Venture had been bound for the New World on a voyage sponsored by The Virginia Company. Given up for lost, they in fact survived and later made their way to Jamestown. A letter written by one of the survivors, William Strachey, refers to conspiracy, rebellion, murder and mutiny which occurred during the time the passengers and crew were on the island. The episode may have inspired Shakespeare to write this play.

Lucas Janszoon Waghenaer, The mariners mirrour, 1588. Mariner's View of Brittany